THE GOOD FIGHT
November 4, 2007
All Saints' Sunday

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Psalm 148
2 Timothy 4: 6–8, 16–18
Hebrews 11:13–15; 12:1–2

"I have fought the good fight,
I have finished the race,
I have kept the faith."
2 Timothy 4:7 (NRSV)

Do not think that my spiritual life is strewn with roses. . . . Quite the contrary,
I have more often as my companion "darkness."
And when the night becomes very thick—then I simply offer myself to Jesus.
. . . If I ever become a Saint—I will surely be one of "darkness."
I will continually be absent from heaven—
to light the light of darkness on earth.

Mother Teresa
Come Be My Light

Whenever people are asked about their favorite hymn, at the top of the list, or very near to it, is always "Onward, Christian Soldiers"—

> Marching as to war
> with the cross of Jesus
> going on before.

It has been around for a long time and has been sung at some propitious moments in history. When Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt met on a battleship, prior to our entry into World War II, to discuss what became the Lend Lease program to assist Great Britain in holding off Nazi Germany, a dark and anxious time, there was a Sunday worship service on deck. And the hymn both leaders wanted sung in the service was "Onward, Christian Soldiers." It was quite a moment.

The hymn is not found in many hymnals any longer, nor are the other hymns that use military, combative imagery:

"Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus, You Soldiers of the cross"
"March On, O Soul, with Strength"
"Am I a Soldier of the Cross?"

And our own hymnal deftly removes two verses from "For All the Saints" and makes them optional—the ones that include

O may thy soldiers, faithful, true and bold
Fight as the saints who nobly fought of old. . . .
And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,
Steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
And hearts are brave again and arms are strong.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

There are good reasons for this. For one thing, it's a long hymn and two fewer verses make it more usable for time-conscious Presbyterians. But more important, we have had quite enough, frankly, of religious warfare: religion co-opted for support of invasions and occupations and wars; quite enough of religion used to justify violence, of geopolitical conflict described in religious terms—"Christian civilization," "Islamofascism." History has seen quite enough of Christian battle banners, crosses on shields, of terrorists killing innocent men, women, and children while crying out "Allah is great!" So it is not a bad idea to give all those hymns about warfare and marching and fighting and triumphing a rest for a while.

And also the idea is afloat out there that Christian faith will make you a "winner." The enormously popular success gospel so effectively marketed by some of the televangelists is very much about winning, overcoming, succeeding, getting ahead, triumphing—a Christianity a friend of mine describes as "Happy/Clappy": everyone full of joy and on top of the world 24/7, rich, healthy, victorious.

So maybe it's a good idea that we don't sing those hymns any longer. But maybe we've lost something important at the same time, namely the sense that life itself can be a struggle, that there are battles to be fought and obstacles to be overcome. Maybe we've lost the sense that religion is not all happiness and light but can also be a struggle, that there are sometimes giants to be fought and demons to be defeated. Peter Gomes says that singing those old hymns "we were reminded that life was not a banquet but a battle, that struggle was a worthy enterprise as long as the goal was worthy" (see *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, pp. 108–135).

St. Paul didn't hesitate to describe the life of faith, his own faith, this way: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

Keeping the faith, for Paul, apparently was not simple, easy, or always uplifting and happy. It was, in fact, a fight, a good fight, a fight worth fighting.

A new book, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light—The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta*, contains a revelation that was so surprising that everybody is talking about it. Mother Teresa struggled with her faith and experienced a great deal of darkness for the last fifty years of her long and remarkable life.

"If I ever become a saint," she wrote, "I will surely be one of darkness."

A native Albanian, she joined the Sisters of Loretto, a missionary order, and was sent to Calcutta in 1929. She was assigned to the Bengali School for Girls, where her superiors recognized her gifts immediately: "prayerfulness, compassion, charity, natural talent for organization and leadership, presence of mind, commonsense and courage." A tiny woman, she once chased an angry bull on the road to protect her girls and once single-handedly scared off thieves trying to rob the convent.

In the 1940s she had a mystical experience in which she heard Jesus ask her to "come be my light" and her response was, "I will never refuse you." She made a vow to "do something beautiful for God" and finally received permission to leave the Sisters of Loretto and found a new order, the Missionaries of Charity, whose mission was simply to bring the light of God's love to the poorest of the poor on the streets of Calcutta. That is exactly what she and the Missionaries of Charity did: minister to the sick and dying, the homeless and forgotten—bring a bit of compassion and dignity into lives that were totally lost and about to end. Her work was so genuine and she was so guilelessly authentic that everyone who heard about her and met her concluded that if there ever was such a thing as a saint, Mother Teresa was one. Malcolm Muggeridge wrote a book about her, *Something Beautiful for God*, and she became something of a celebrity, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979.

Who would have known that all the while she was experiencing not the spiritual fullness and contentment and happiness that everyone expected, but darkness, doubt, emptiness, longing? Her personal journals and correspondence with spiritual directors, advisers, and superiors reveal a very brave woman doing remarkable things and struggling with darkness. Some of it is almost stream of consciousness, almost difficult to read. To her spiritual director:

> Now Father . . . this terrible sense of loss—this untold darkness—this loneliness—this continued longing for God which gives me that pain deep

> down in my heart . . . the place of God in my soul is blank. . . . I feel that God does not want me. . . . Sometimes I just hear my heart cry out, “My God” and nothing else comes. (pp. 1–2)

Some are criticizing Mother Teresa posthumously. Some, mostly evangelicals, are finding her darkness the equivalent of lack of faith. Some secularists, the neo-atheists, are gleefully rubbing their hands and saying, “Aha! Her experience of God’s absence means there is nothing there, no God, as we have been trying to tell everyone.”

Martin Marty, on the other hand, calls the book “sadly beautiful” and “beautifully sad.” And *Newsweek*’s Ken Woodward said he used to feel almost put off by Mother Teresa’s perfection, but now he can come closer. She was human after all.

Mother Teresa’s experience is a gift, I think—a reminder that saintliness doesn’t mean living with consistent, sustained certainty and a daily personal communion with God. She is a reminder that darkness can be and often is a part of faith and that to be human is to doubt and occasionally experience spiritual emptiness and to struggle and try to be brave and fight.

What Mother Teresa didn’t do was surrender to the darkness, become despondent, and withdraw from her call. Instead, with amazing strength she fought the fight, continued to do what she believed God wanted her to do and Jesus called her to do. She never stopped loving Jesus and trying to be his light. “I will never refuse you,” she told him, and her final dying words were simply, “I have never refused you.”

Another contemporary saint, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote letters from his Nazi prison cell, wrote reflections, meanderings, and poems. One of my favorites is:

> Who am I? They often tell me
> I stepped from my cell’s confinement
> Calmly, cheerfully, firmly . . .
>
> Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
> Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
> Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
> Struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat . . .
> weary and empty at praying . . .
> Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?
> Who am I? This or the other?” (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 221)

Saints are not always victoriously happy, full of religious certainty, and in constant communion with God. Well, if they're not absolutely sure, then what are they?

I love Barbara Brown Taylor's description: "What makes a saint?" she asks. "Extravagance. Excessive love, flagrant mercy, exuberant charity, immoderate faith, intemperate hope, inordinate love" (*Weavings*) and I would add, courage to fight the good fight and finish the race. Mother Teresa, with her passionate love for Jesus, her selflessness, certainly qualifies. She wrote:

> And when the night becomes very thick and it seems to me as if I will end up in hell—then I simply offer myself to Jesus. If he wants me there—I am ready.

That, it seems to me, in a profound way, is the ultimate selflessness: a readiness to go to hell for Jesus.

We Protestants aren't ordinarily sure what to do with saints. We actually don't have any, officially at least, although it is now customary to observe this day, All Saints', in many Protestant churches, including this one. It is a day to acknowledge, name, and thank God for those who preceded us, who have gone before, who have fought the fight and finished the race.

Richard Mouw, President of Fuller Seminary and a very generous evangelical, was invited to discuss saints—and praying to saints—with a Roman Catholic theologian. Protestants, Rich said, have a pretty limited vision on this topic. Protestants ordinarily say you can't and shouldn't even try to pray to anyone but God. Case closed. He was forced to reconsider when the Catholic theologian told him that properly understood "praying to a saint in heaven is nothing more than a conversation with another Christian. . . . We ask friends on earth to pray for us. What's wrong with asking friends in heaven?" he argued. "After all they may be in a better position to get through to God than even some of our most pious friends on earth." Rich isn't ready to start praying to saints, but he is thinking about it —and is seeing the statue of St. Francis he keeps in his yard by the bird feeder in a whole new light ("Communion with the Saints," *Christian Century,* 15 May 2007).

The writer of the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews makes an astonishing and lovely assertion on the topic. He's writing to people, by the way, who are in a lot of trouble. At the end of the first century, facing fierce persecution from Rome, fearing for the very existence of their small churches, fearing for their own safety and the safety of their families, fearing for their lives, they needed some encouragement. And so the writer calls the roll of all those who have gone before: Abraham and Isaac and

Jacob, Sarah, Moses, Gideon and Sampson, David and Samuel . . . others were imprisoned, flogged, executed . . . yet they kept the faith.

And then this amazing idea: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” A lot of people have gone before us, faced the darkness, struggled with enemies—real and internal—doubted and questioned and experienced the absence of God, even Jesus who voiced it so terribly and eloquently as he died on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” They all struggled and they are all there for us—the great ones and small ones, the famous ones and the quiet ones, the ones we knew and lost and still mourn, and the ones before them we never knew. They are all there for us. We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.

Nothing of love is ever lost. Our relationship with those who have died and gone before changes. It does not end, because nothing of love is ever lost. It simply moves to a new dimension.

Did you happen to see the Garrison Keillor column in the paper two weeks ago, “Trip to Church Spurs Thoughts of the Father”? Keillor visited a church in Baltimore recently on Sunday morning. It was high-church Anglican liturgy, very formal, none of that “Hi, how are you?” chumminess. There were more people in the choir than the pews, but the singing was, he said, “O my God beautiful,” and he started to think about his father. His father was faithful to his family, the Ford Motor Company, and his small separatist church. Keillor was never close to him. As soon as he could, Keillor left the little separatist church, left town, left the small circle of his father’s life to pursue a career. He wrote so poignantly, “There have been dozens of people who happened to sit next to me on airplanes over the years who knew more about me than my dad did. No more his fault than mine.” He thought about it all day and wrote, “Thank you for your life, Dad” (*Chicago Tribune* 18 October 2007).

It reminded me of something Madeline L’Engle, one of my saints, who died this year, once said. She said she understood and knew her father far better now, years after he had died, than she ever knew and understood him during his life. I suspect something like that is true for many of us: we do know and understand them better now. We all, I suspect, have at least some thanking to do—for the faithful, strong love of parents and aunts and uncles and grandparents. If you can still do it, if they are still here, then by all means do it. But if they are not, don’t despair. Do it anyway. They are part of your cloud of witnesses. And some of us I suspect have serious work to do—understanding, apologizing, reconciling, forgiving, saying, “I love you.” Do it. Say it. And if they are gone, say it and do it anyhow.

A few years ago, Dana Ferguson told us that when she graduated from college she gave her parents a plaque that said, “I am because of my parents’ love.” I knew what a treasure that was and is—and how wise to say it.

I was mesmerized a few weeks ago by Ken Burns’ *The War.* I watched nearly all of it and have seen several segments a second time. I don’t know that I’ve ever seen anything so truthful about the reality of war, how unromantic, how ghastly and tragic. I don’t know that I’ve ever seen anything that so unflinchingly portrayed the suffering and sacrifice of the combatants, young men fighting for survival, thrown into battles to the death, and the civilians caught in the middle, the dreadful price they paid. I paid particular attention to the segment on Saipan, one of the Marianna Islands in the Pacific, scene of some of the very worst of it as U.S. Marines fought Japanese soldiers, inch by inch, until they were all dead. That is where John Calvin McCormick—how’s that for a Presbyterian name?—was killed. He was my Uncle Jack. I am named for him. He was my mother’s younger brother, a Marine. I have a vague memory of him walking with my mother to pick me up and walk me home from nursery school. He’s in his uniform and it’s snowing. He was twenty-four years old in 1944 when he died: never married, never had children, didn’t live very long. I keep his picture on my desk—a young Marine in that great cloud of witnesses.

It is a day to remember and thank them all—all those who lived and died, who fought the fight and kept the faith: Your personal saints, the ones who loved you, and the ones before them whose love lived in them and came to you. Your saints, the ones whose faith and love inspire your own to be strong and brave and faithful, even in the darkness. Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Calvin and Luther, Joshua, Moses, David—and Jesus. It is a day to remember and thank them all.

And when I sing “For All the Saints” at the end of this service, I plan to exercise editorial prerogative. I’m going to substitute the deleted alternatives today, and you may, too, if you wish. For verses three and four I will sing

> O may thy soldiers, faithful, true and bold,
> Fight as the saints who nobly fought of old. . . .
> And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,
> Steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
> And hearts are brave again and arms are strong.
> Alleluia! Alleluia!